

The Napoleon Series

A Polish Aide-de-Camp at Albuera 16 May 1811

By Captain Jakub Kierzkowski

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This account is by Captain Jakub Kierzkowski, aide to the cavalry commander General Latour-Maubourg and it describes his participation in the Battle of Albuera, 25 km from the fortress of Badajoz on 16 May 1811. It was published in *Pamiętniki J.F. Kierzkowskiego*, Warsaw, 1903.

Marshal [Adolphe] Mortier received orders from *Paris* to return to France to take command of the Young Guard, and thus the command of V Corps passed to General [Victor] Latour-Maubourg. General [Jean-Baptiste] Girard was left in *Badajoz* with 6,000 troops, while Latour-Maubourg taking the rest of V Corps returned to the town of *Llerene*. Shortly afterwards the English under Wellington came up and imposed a blockade on *Badajoz* for good, attempting to approach the fortress using those same trenches and tunnels that we had made use of and which it had proved impossible to destroy in time. Marshal [Jean-de-Dieu] Soult hurried forwards to drive the English from *Badajoz*, gathering 22,000 troops and taking *Zafra* and *Santa Marta*, a mile from *Albuera*, where the English had already taken up their positions [with 36,000 English-Portuguese-Spanish troops].

Marshal [Auguste] Marmont, with his corps, continued his march to assist us at *Albuera*, but Marshal Soult did not wait for Marmont before engaging in battle. It started with great fury. Throughout, I was placed at the disposal of General Latour-Maubourg, who commanded the cavalry. Once the army was deployed, with some regiments remaining in reserve, he sent me to Colonel [Jan] Konopka in order to place his regiment to the left of the 10th Hussars. I immediately conveyed orders to Colonel Konopka to trot forwards, and wanted to go back to the general in order to report to him that Konopka was advancing. However, the colonel requested that I take him to the specific position, which I did before galloping back to General Latour-Maubourg with news that the regiment was now in position.

The British artillery was now starting to hit the French cavalry, and their infantry was bravely advancing with the bayonet against their French counterparts. The left wing of the French infantry began to yield, whilst the French right pushed back against the English. Just then, General Latour sent me to Colonel Konopka, who was not then present with the regiment, ordering that one squadron of uhlans [lancers] charge the rear of the English infantry at the canter. The commander of [Telesfor] Kostanecki's squadron fell on the British infantry, and took the entire battalion prisoner along with their standard and four

cannon. The British sent a squadron of hussars against the Polish lancers, but they did not dare attack, seeing a fresh squadron of the uhlans moving up in support.

The cannonade grew more intense, a roundshot glancing under my horse, smashing my stirrup and wounding my leg. My horse collapsed and trapped my leg and I could not pull it out or get free from the horse until a captain of the 10th Hussars had me pulled out and so, soaked in my horse's blood, I mounted a mare taken from a killed hussar. Unfortunately she had been wounded between her ears with a pistol shot, and so I did not ride very far because she soon collapsed and died. Despite of oppressive heat, I managed to drag myself back to the road to Seville, where I found my servants and spare horses. I changed my uniform, kept one boot on one leg, and wore a slipper on the other, and mounted another of my horses.

Evening was coming, Marmont had not arrived and the army remained on the battlefield. It was not until the third day that Marshal Soult, lacking food for the army, was forced to fall back on *Seville*, and on Marmont's corps at *Traxico*. The English lost a lot of people at *Albuera*, especially from their cavalry. The Polish cavalry defeated their cavalry in each attack, because the English horses feared the pennons of Polish lances, so their horses always turned and fled, and the Poles stabbed them from behind. Many of the English complained about the conduct of the Polish lancers as they deployed their lances effectively when in pursuit.

Returning to the battlefield of *Albuera* our corps rested there and I went to see the place where my horse had been killed, but I found only ashes, because the English had ordered that dead soldiers were to be buried and dead horses burned, so that the air was not infected. In this terrible heat, I felt a great desire to drink and I approached the stream through which we had passed when advancing to battle and drank a cup of water. It looked like a clean spring, and I was tempted to drink again, swallowing a second time when I suddenly noticed the corpse of a dead soldier with a wound from a musket or bayonet in his side and partially hidden by the branches of a tree. I was immediately sick, was struck down by fever and falling ill was forced to go to *Seville* for treatment. I remained ill there for almost one and a half months.

[A few months] later, Marshal Soult received a message that several thousand insurgents had landed near *Gibraltar* and were advancing through the mountains towards *Seville*. Then Marshal Soult sent orders to the corps of Generals [Claude] Victor and [Horace] Sebastiani to dispatch one infantry division each, sending them along the [Mediterranean] coast, one from *Cadiz*, and another from *Ronda* in order to cut off the insurgents. From *Seville* he also sent a reserve under General [Nicolas] Godinot, who was to advance so that he would blockade *Gibraltar*, whilst these two divisions intercepted the enemy. I had recovered by then and could therefore be of use to General Godinot in this expedition. General Godinot force-marched his division and so we were first to encounter the insurgents pushing them back before us towards *Gibraltar*, with the two other divisions arriving a few hours later.

However, ultimately, the expedition was not a success and the generals returned their divisions to their original positions. When we quit *Gibraltar* for the town of *San Roque*, all the inhabitants fled and when my servant brought the horses into a building's courtyard there was not a living soul, only some birds, song birds and monkeys attached to chains and all very hungry especially the poultry which had nearly starved. I was initially with General Godinot outside of the town at the place where our troops had taken up positions. Later on the general rode into *San Roque*, and was billeted at the English inn. I also arrived to see my servant, and obtained food for the birds and a monkey, and fed them, watching the monkey fawning and behaving with absolute charm. When the time came to leave *San Roque* I accompanied General Godinot, and it was my servant who led the horses and carried the monkey to the horse, which also bore my two small bags. He placed this monkey on the horse and tied it to the saddle but when we started crossing through the mountains, everybody had to dismount and lead their horses. Our monkey slipped down on the horse's neck and started to pull his mane, the horse shook his head and the monkey found himself between the horse's front legs. Of course the horse was terrified, and began to buck, and almost fell from the high mountain. The saddle girth broke, the bags fell to the ground, and the monkey, too. I ran up to it, grabbed the servant, and ordered that he let the monkey go into the mountains in order to avoid any further misfortune.

After our arrival at *Seville*, Marshal Soult, angry at General Godinot for having failed to carry out his plan for the expedition, ordered that a court martial try him. Without waiting for the verdict, the general killed himself. At 3 o'clock in the morning, he ran down to the sentry post and brought a soldier's musket back to his room, put the barrel in his mouth, and with his foot he pulled the trigger so that his head was blown off and his brains splattered across the walls. General Godinot was 70 years old and was once a hero, but he was unfortunate in that he liked to drink so much despite his age. Almost all the time we marched along he was summoning his servant Garyg and getting him to bring him a bottle. After this expedition I returned to the headquarters staff of Marshal Soult.

Kierzkowski, Jakub Filip (1771--1862) enlisted in the Polish army in August 1788, serving as a cadet in the 1st Royal Regiment. A year later he was a corporal and he took part in the Polish-Russian war of 1792 and in the so called Kościuszko Uprising of 1794. He fought at San Domingo in the Legion of General Charles Kniaziewicz, and in Prussia and Poland in the years 1806-1807 on the staff of Marshal Jean Lannes. He was in Spain between 1808 and 1812 and took part in the 1813 campaign in Prussia and the 1814 campaign in France. He also participated in the 1830 Polish November Uprising against Russia.

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